

Developing a Game Plan

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PART 1: GOALS

The first question I am always asked when I meet someone is "WHY are you learning X?" If you've been studying languages using language exchange sites, you've probably been asked this question a lot, too. This question from native speakers of your target language is an important one. You need to know the answer to it yourself, and you need to remind yourself about it frequently. So take a moment, grab a piece of paper and a pen, and write down the reasons why you are learning your target language....

Okay, so now you have a list of reasons. But what about language functions? With those reasons in mind, in what ways do you need to be able to use the language? In which situations do you need to be able to use the language comfortably? For example, if you are learning the language to travel there for a short vacation, you would need to know how to ask for directions, how to inquire about hotel rooms, how to order a meal at a restaurant, and so on. So now write down some ways you would need to be able to use the language - specific things you would need to be able to ask or talk about and the vocabulary needed for these topics....

Based on the things you wrote down, you should now select the most appropriate level you would have to attain in the language. If you are only traveling there for a short vacation, for example, learning to do all the things at the Novice level would probably be sufficient. There are several different ways to assess your progress, but I'll use the AFTCL's guidelines. Here is a brief version of their scale:

Novice speakers are able to: use basic courtesies of daily life; greetings, leave takings, apologies and gratitude; respond to simple questions on the most common features of life; get their point across to speakers who are experienced in dealing with language learners by using individual words, lists of words, memorized phrases, by sometimes making up their own sentences; satisfy a very limited number of immediate needs.

Beginning speakers are able to: participate in simple, direct conversation on general and predictable topics related to daily activities and personal environment; create with the language and communicate personal meaning to patient listeners by combining what they have learned into sentences and expressions; obtain and give information by asking and answering questions; sustain and end a number of basic conversations; satisfy simple personal needs and social demands to survive in the target language culture.

Intermediate speakers are able to: participate actively in most informal and some formal settings on topics of personal interest; narrate and describe about things in the past, present and the future and talk about things that are continuing and that have been completed; deal effectively with unanticipated complication through a variety of communicative devices; sustain conversation by using connected speech of paragraph length and substance; satisfy the demands of most work or school situations.

Advanced speakers are able to: participate fully and effectively in conversations in formal and informal settings on topics related to practical needs and areas of professional or academic interest; provide a structured argument to explain and defend opinions and develop ideas within extended

conversation; discuss topics concretely and abstractly; deal with an unfamiliar situation; maintain a high degree of accuracy in word choice and grammar; satisfy the demands of a professional or academic life.

Now write down the highest level you should achieve in your target language. This is where you are going. But where are you now? What things can you already do with the language? Write down your current level....

The gap between where you are and where you are going gives you a syllabus. So, now write out those things you need to learn to do....

The question now is, how do you learn those things? We have drawn ourselves a map showing where we are and where we are going. We know why we need to go there. But now we need to know how - by foot, by bike, by car, by train, by plane, etc.? This is sometimes the hardest part because there are so many options, how do you know which one to choose? There will be more about this in upcoming posts, but for now, write down every resource you can think of for your target language: music, speech podcasts, TV shows, movies, books, workbooks, phrasebooks, software programs, websites, blogs, online courses, flash cards, speaking with and writing to penpals, etc. Write down everything you can think of. Be specific - give titles of books and specific sites that you have found. Be sure to include language learning communities like livemocha, lingq, conversationexchange, sharedtalk, etc.

Next time I will write about how to choose materials, but for now, you should just choose something to do to get started on your language learning journey. Choose one of the language functions you need to learn to do and start working your way toward being able to do it. Stay tuned for next week's post. Until then, happy language learning!

PART 2: CHOOSING MATERIALS

In the last post, I talked about setting goals, so that you have a clearly-defined path from where you are to where you are going. Now, it's time to choose materials. Actually I will be spending most of my time writing about different methods of language learning and different activities you can try to enhance your language studies. This isn't a topic which can be covered in one short article. However, there is one extremely important principle which must be stated, and it is...

CHOOSE INTERESTING MATERIALS.

Whether you choose to use a teacher, a textbook, an audio course, a computer game, novels, music, or whatever, make sure it is interesting TO YOU. What interests me most likely will not be interesting to you. The methods that you choose to learn with may not be as effective for me; I will want to do different things. But keeping it interesting is vital.

If you are not interested, how will you motivate yourself to study? Sure, you can force yourself, but that usually just creates tension. And "Any form of anxiety, any form of tension, inhibits true and effective learning" (Michel Thomas). To keep yourself motivated, choose something interesting. If you become tired with that, choose something else that is interesting. Begin with your interests in your native language. If they are extremely interesting to you in your native tongue, then they will likely be interesting to you in your target language also.

Remember the goals we set last week? Add to that a list of your favorite activities and interests, and this week choose one or two of them to do in your target language.

As I said, choosing materials and activities for language learning is a big topic, and we'll be spending a lot of time talking about how to do it. So stay tuned for more ideas next week, and remember that you can contact me with any questions you have! :)